

First Annual Report of the President of the Board of Aldermen 1/3/04

1. Introduction.

Colleagues, distinguished guests, citizens, friends and family.

I am honored to offer to you my first Annual Report as President of the Newton Board of Aldermen.

My late father used to say about sermons that there are no souls saved after 20 minutes, so I will try to stay within that limit, though if I go over, it will be because I want to recognize some of the people who are here tonight.

What I am about to say is not news to the members of the Board or many of our guests, but many Newton citizens may not fully understand the important role the Board plays in City Government and the many actions we take that affect the quality of life in Newton. So the purpose of this Report is to

- inform citizens about the Board's role and describe some of what the Board has done in the last year,
- highlight some issues which the Board of Aldermen will take up this coming year, and
- acknowledge some of the many valued colleagues in City government who help the Board do its work.

2. Background on the Newton Board of Aldermen.

While the Mayor is the Chief Executive of the City, it is worth remembering that the City Charter provides that "...except as otherwise provided by law or the Charter, all powers of the City shall be vested in the Board of Aldermen...."

So how has the Board exercised its powers during the last year? I will outline that in a moment, but first I want to acknowledge the work of my colleagues in the Board leadership and staff.

For example, Vice-President Amy Sangiolo has

- updated our Aldermanic web page,
- drafted job descriptions for the City Clerk and Clerk of the Board of Aldermen and his staff,
- organized inaugural and holiday events, and
- ably presided over the Board meetings when the President is Acting Mayor.

Also, President Emeritus Vance has agreed to chair special committees on Long Range Planning, the design of the New High School, and a special Blue Ribbon

Commission of citizens and Aldermen examining salaries of Newton's elected officials, all of which are still ongoing.

The Board has also been aided by our venerable Clerk of the Board and City Clerk, Edward English, and his able colleagues on the staff: Linda Finucane, Rosalie Myers, Christine Owen, Shawna Sullivan and our newest colleague, Melissa Hardy. I owe Ms. Sullivan a special debt because she has been my principal liaison with the Clerk's office and has been helpful in getting together much of what you will hear tonight. Together these individuals are responsible for so much of what we do in helping communicate with colleagues and the public on behalf of the Board, assemble the docket, agendas and reports of items for the Board to consider, prepare the board orders and revised or new ordinances that result from Board action, and staff the various Board Committees.

I also should pause to recognize that after almost 33 years of service, our City Clerk and Clerk of the Board, Edward English, is retiring at the end of this term. While we will find another occasion to pay proper tribute to him, the City will miss you, Ed; and, yours will be a hard act to follow.

Finally, while the Clerk's staff and the Board officers serve the Board as a whole, the Board does most of its work divided into nine standing and several special Committees. The public may be unaware of much of their work because most of their recommendations are adopted without debate at the first call of Committee Reports at the beginning of each Board meeting. Before I outline the specific work of these committees and their leadership and staff, who organize their work and prepare their reports, it is important to note that these Committees

- recommended approval of over one hundred Mayoral and Aldermanic appointments of citizen volunteers to various advisory and regulatory Boards and Commissions, and
- reviewed over \$270 million in requested appropriations either as part of the Mayor's budget as presented or as separate items.

In total, the Board has disposed of over 300 docket items in the last year, including a number of resolutions honoring accomplishments of Newton Citizens, such as the Newton North High School Mock Trial Team State Champions, the establishment of Anthony J. Bibbo Youth Center, and the Gold Crown Award for the Daytime school newspaper, to name a few.

I will introduce the work of these Committees in the order in which they make reports to the Full Board under our Rules.

3. The Work of the Committees of the Board.

First, the **Land Use Committee** has made over thirty site-specific recommendations relating to land development in the City, including 32 new units of housing, as well as some rear lot subdivisions, extensions of structures that do not conform to current zoning rules, permits for wireless communications, grade changes of more than three feet on a site, amended site plans and waivers of parking requirements. This last year, the Committee recommended and the Board enacted, after some clarifying amendments, new Rules to govern the process of granting special permits and site plan reviews so as to make sure projects are properly prepared before being filed for Aldermanic review. These will be complemented by user-friendly guides to the special permit process being prepared by the Planning Department. Also, work is ongoing in the Committee on a Statement of Good Practices to guide how aldermen should respond to contact from those interested in a special permit since in this role, aldermen act in a quasi-judicial rather than in a legislative capacity. In the coming year, a number of major projects will be presented to and examined by the Committee, including Newton Wellesley Hospital.

The Land Use Committee Chairman is George Mansfield, the Vice-Chairman: Mitchell Fischman, and the Committee is staffed principally by Linda Finucane of the Clerk's Office, Associate City Solicitor Ouida Young, and either Planning Director Michael Kruse or Chief Planner Nancy Radzevich, together with the planner assigned to a specific matter, usually Eric Jerman or Alexandra Anath, as well as the City Engineer and Associate City Engineer Lou Taverna and John Daghljan.

Next is the **Zoning and Planning Committee**. Last year the Committee recommended

- updating the City's longstanding inclusionary zoning ordinance, this provides a density bonus in multifamily developments if some affordable housing is also provided in the same development,
- an ordinance to control oversized perimeter fences near public ways,
- rezoning the land occupied by St. Bernard's Church in West Newton to minimize the adverse effects on Washington Street near the Turnpike entrance of any redevelopment if the Church were ultimately closed,
- accepting various conservation and preservation restrictions offered by property owners,
- strengthening the enforcement power of the Conservation Commission, and
- limiting subdivisions of rear lots to protect neighboring properties.

This coming year, the Zoning and Planning Committee is expected to take up the possible creation of a Historic District for the Auburndale section of Newton, as well as the several zoning amendments, including possible rezoning of the Angino Farm after it is acquired by the City.

The Zoning and Planning Committee's Chairman is Brian Yates, who along with Alderman Stewart serves on the City's Public Buildings Preservation Task Force; the Vice-chairman is Cheryl Lappin, and the Committee is principally staffed by Linda Finucane of the Clerk's office, Assistant City Solicitor Michael Baseman, as well as Alksnitis of the Planning Department, with help from Martha Horn, Conservation Planner, on conservation issues.

The **Programs and Services Committee** last year worked extensively on

- the many aspects of a new Newton North High School,
- the responsibilities of New TV regarding its programming as they relate to the City,
- an ordinance to control excess light on neighboring properties,
- a request for a special act to enhance the income limits for certain tax deferral programs, and
- strengthening the Board's own rules. This Committee also sees more appointees than any other.

In the coming year, the Committee anticipates working on

- whether to recommend local voting rights for permanent resident aliens,
- establishing a task force to examine whether and how dogs should be allowed off-leash in parts of the City,
- whether and how the Board of Aldermen itself should be reduced in size.

The Programs and Services Chairman is Marcia Johnson; the Vice-chairman, Theodore Hess-Mahan. It is staffed by Rosalie Myers of the Clerk's office, and most often, by Associate City Solicitor Gayle Smalley.

Next is the **Public Safety and Transportation** Committee, which last year made recommendations

- to increase safety near Newton Schools,
- provide off-site parking for Newton North,
- add metered parking in West Newton,
- coordinate traffic and parking signs with enforcement,
- update taxi licenses and fees, and
- update parking fines to match surrounding communities.

During the next year, the Committee anticipates looking into an ordinance to raise crosswalks for traffic calming in appropriate locations, ways to enhance safety in snow clearing by residents and contractors, and improvements in the living facilities in fire stations.

The Public Safety Committee Chairman also sits on the Newton Traffic Council, which makes recommendations to the Board about parking and traffic controls in the City. Aside from addressing almost 60 specific petitions, the Council has worked on developing a handicapped parking policy, approved several neighborhood traffic improvements, and developed additional metered parking for long-term parking in Newton Centre. In the future, it is likely to examine more issues relating to parking restrictions, handicapped spaces, stop signs, and speed limits.

The Public Safety Committee Chairman is Christine Samuelson and its Vice-Chairman is Scott Lennon. It is staffed for work by Christine Owen of the Clerk's office but also by Clint Schuckel, the City Traffic Engineer, David Koses, Transportation Planner, with help from Gayle Smalley, Cathy Salchert, Catherine Farrell of the Law Department, and Officer Paul Bianchi and Officer Dawn Hough of the Police Department. The Traffic Council also involves Chairman Candace Havens and most often Sergeant James Norcross of the Police Department, and is staffed by Rosalie Myers of the Clerk's office.

The **Public Facilities Committee** last year recommended

- ordinance amendments to allow needed acceptance of private ways which wanted to become public, as well as help repair existing private ways,
- street and utility reconstruction, including several new traffic islands,
- a database of information about public buildings,
- separate trash pickup of white goods, like refrigerators
- providing single family water rates for condominiums and apartments, and setting water rates at an amount which will recover the cost to the City from the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority,
- design funds for a new Newton North High School, including resolutions urging high performance buildings and designer selection which would include how finalists would respond to the challenge of this project, and
- progress of renovations and construction at Newton South High School.

In the next year, the Committee anticipates working on the issues of raised crosswalks for traffic calming, the redesign and reconstruction of Needham and Walnut Street, policies regarding snow clearing, and improvements to Fire Stations.

The Chairman of the Public Facilities Committee is Sydra Schnipper and the Vice-chairman, Anthony Salvucci. It is staffed by Shawna Sullivan of the Clerk's Office, and supported in much of its work by Building Commissioner Nicholas Parnell, Public Works Commissioner Robert Rooney, and Gayle Smalley and Cathy Salchert of the Newton Law Department.

Next is the **Finance Committee** which oversees a City budget of over a quarter of a billion dollars, half of which is allocated to the Newton Schools, and most of which is paid by taxes on residential property.

While only the Mayor can ask for an appropriation, nothing can be spent without the Board's approval. The Board's rules provide that all but small items are reviewed by the Committee with jurisdiction over a matter and then by the Finance Committee to put the various pieces together. In the interests of time, I have not included each of the budget reviews by each of the substantive Committees but they go on regularly throughout the year for supplemental appropriations as well as when the Mayor presents his complete budget to the Board for action in the spring. Essential to this work are the City's department heads and the School Superintendent who regularly appear before the Board Committees to explain their requests and address other matters from time to time. We appreciate all their input even if time does not permit them all to be specifically recognized tonight.

The Chairman of the Finance Committee by tradition presides over the public hearing and Committee of the Whole discussion of setting the relative share of property taxes to be paid each year by residential and commercial or industrial property, which last year the Board voted to set fiscal 2005 tax rates at \$9.48/\$1,000 of assessed valuation for residential property and \$18.02/\$1,000 for commercial/industrial properties

In total, this year, the Board, with the Finance Committee's recommendation, approved appropriations or funding for \$275,000,000 and bond authorizations of \$7,400,000. The Board also, through its various Committees, and ultimately through the Finance Committee, reviewed and made recommendations to the Executive Department's \$185 million capital improvement program for the five year period 2005-2009.

In addition, the Finance Committee worked with the Comptroller's office to select new auditors for the City, and with the Treasurer Collector to enhance its cash and investment reconciliation procedures. Finally, the Committee worked to help achieved full actuarial funding of the City's Workers Compensation Self-Insurance Fund, a plan that was initiated at the recommendation of the Comptroller and Treasurer in 1995.

In the upcoming year, the Finance Committee will continue this work, including funding of upcoming Community Preservation Projects, for Newton North High School, and of course, the annual budget and Capital Improvement Plan.

The Finance Committee's Chairman is Paul Coletti and its Vice-chairman, John Stewart. It is staffed by Christine Owen of the Clerk's office and our able City Comptroller, David Wilkinson, as well as aided by Elizabeth Dromey of the Assessing Department, as well as Chief Administrative Officer Mike Rourke, and Budget Officer Sandy Pooler, who meet regularly with this and other Committees on behalf of the Mayor on financial and other issues.

The **Real Property Reuse Committee** last year approved the leasing of the Carr School in Newtonville to the Parks & Recreation Department & its Cultural Affairs division, which will likely license space at the School to the Suzuki School, Newton Country Players, Newton Symphony Orchestra, and the Newton Rep Theater, to name a few.

The Chairman of the Real Property Reuse Committee is Richard Lipof; Vice-chairman, Robert Gerst, and is staffed by Linda Finucane of the Clerk's office and Eileen McGettigan of the Newton Law Department.

The **Post Audit and Oversight Committee** last year conducted a review of Millennium Balsamo Park, and the related department head parking lot, as well as the process for settling litigation. Upcoming may be a consideration of a policy for use of active public safety equipment and manpower for non-emergency or ceremonial purposes, and to the extent not already addressed by other Committees, the status of fire station repairs.

The Chairman of the Post Audit Committee is Carleton Merrill; Vice-chairman, Leonard Gentile, and is staffed by Shawna Sullivan of the Clerk's office.

Finally, there is the new **Committee on Community Preservation**, which recommends how we spend funds for open space, affordable housing, recreation and historic preservation raised by one per cent of property taxes paid in the City matched by state funds raised under the Community Preservation Act. Last year the Committee recommended and the Board ultimately approved funding of approximately \$2.3 million in cash and bonding to purchase the former Angino Farm at the corner of Winchester and Nahanton Streets, as well as other CPA projects, a number of which involved provision of affordable community housing and historic preservation. As 2005 approaches, the Committee is preparing to face a high volume of matters that may come from the Community Preservation Committee as a record number of CPA applications have been filed, including funds for work on some nonprofit buildings, such as the Newton YMCA.

The Committee on Community Preservation's Chairman is Stephen Linsky; Vice-chairman, Ken Parker, and is staffed principally by Christine Owen of the Clerk's Office and by Jennifer Goldson of the Planning Department.

Also, as indicated at the outset, we are eager to have the continued the work of the **Blue Ribbon Commission** on salaries, the **Long Range Planning Committee** and the new **High School Design Advisory Committee**, which are Chaired by Alderman Vance and staffed by Shawna Sullivan of the Clerk's office, who also staffs the monthly meetings of Board Chairmen to discuss internal Board administration.

Last but not least, I especially want to mention our newest colleagues:

Alderman Jay Harney, who serves on the Land Use, Public Safety, and Real Property Reuse Committees;

Alderman Susan Albright who also serves on Land Use, Public Facilities, and Real Property Reuse Committees; and

Alderman Victoria Danberg who serves on Zoning and Planning, Public Safety and Real Property Reuse.

They have already made significant contributions, which will only continue.

4. Some things to come.

During the next year, I hope that the Long Range Planning Committee, in addition to its work in setting the job description for the retiring Clerk of the board, so that a search can begin for his successor, can continue to look into ways the Board can be made more efficient and effective. Already, initiatives it undertook should reshape our budget process for the better by bringing to the Board information to show the purpose for which funds are spent and not just which account they are charged against.

The basic effort here is to help make sure that we spend more of our limited time on the major issues before the city and less time on the minor ones, which I hope can continue in other areas. For example, are there matters, such as some appointments or licenses, which the Board might consider delegating to some other body to act upon in the first instance, like the Traffic Council, so the Board can spend more time on matters where extensive deliberation is involved, or even anticipate more problems before they arise?

In the meantime, in the coming year the Board will continue to address major issues such as Newton North, and also the budget and land use policies for the City, as well as those issues where the Executive Department requires the advice and consent of the Aldermen.

It has been an honor to serve as President this past year, and I look forward to working with you all during this new year.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted, R. Lisle Baker, President